

The Romans

Dissertation on Roman Politics in Religion (1716)

Dissertation sur la politique des Romains dans la religion, text by Lorenzo Bianchi (OC VIII, 83–99). Montesquieu became a member of the Academy of Bordeaux in May 1716, and this paper, read on 18 June of that same year, was his first composition shared with that body, not counting his reception oration. It was first published in 1796 in the Plassan edition of Montesquieu's works (*Oeuvres*, Paris: Plassan et al., 1797, IV, pp. 193–207). Our base text, as in OC VIII, is the manuscript (in the hand of a copyist) which is part of the Montesquieu collection in the municipal library of Bordeaux (MS 828/VI, no 6).

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It was neither fear nor piety that established religion among the Romans, but rather the necessity in all societies to have one. The first kings were no less attentive to regulating worship and ceremonies than to making laws and building walls. I find this difference between Roman lawmakers and those of other peoples: that the former made the religion for the state, the latter the state for the religion. Romulus,¹ Titus,² and Numa³ subordinated the gods to politics: the worship and ceremonies they instituted were found to be so wise that when the kings were expelled the yoke of religion was the only one from which this people, in clamoring for freedom, dared not emancipate itself.

¹ According to legend, Rome's first king, Romulus (reigned 753–716 BCE), consulted the gods before laying out the sacred boundaries of Rome in 753 BCE, dedicated a temple to Jupiter, and established religious festivals and rites.

² Titus Tatius, king of the Sabines, was for a brief time the co-ruler with Romulus of a combined Roman and Sabine kingdom.

³ Rome's legendary second king, Numa Pompilius (reigned 715–673 BCE), called "the founder of divine law" by Livy, established the *flamines*, priests of Roman religion, and also the *pontifices* and the Vestal Virgins (Livy 1.20).

When the Roman lawmakers established religion, they were not thinking of reforming morals, nor of laying down moral principles; they did not mean to constrain people who were not yet acquainted with the obligations of a society into which they had just entered.

Accordingly, they had at first only a general intention, which was to inspire fear of the gods in a people who feared nothing, and to make use of that fear to lead them in any way they wished.

Numa's successors did not dare to do what that prince had not done. The people, which had lost much of its fierceness and roughness, had become capable of greater discipline. It would have been easy to add to the religious ceremonies principles and rules of morality which it lacked, but the Romans were too shrewd not to realize how dangerous such a reform would have been. It would have meant acknowledging that their religion was imperfect; it would have given it a history and weakened its authority by attempting to strengthen it. The Romans' wisdom led them to choose a better course by establishing new laws. Human institutions may well change, but divine ones must be immutable like the gods themselves.

Thus the Roman senate, having charged the praetor Petilius⁴ with examining the writings of king Numa which had been found in a stone chest four hundred years after that king's death, resolved to have them burned on receiving that praetor's report that the ceremonies which were prescribed in those writings differed greatly from the ones that were then being practiced, which could raise doubts in the minds of simple people and show them that the prescribed cult was not the same as the one which had been instituted by the original legislators and inspired by the nymph Egeria.⁵

They carried prudence further. No one could read the Sibylline books without the permission of the senate, which granted it only on great occasions and when the purpose was to console the people. All interpretations were prohibited. The books themselves were always kept locked up, and, by a very wise precaution, fanatical and seditious persons were disarmed.⁶

⁴ Quintus Petilius Cerialis (c. 30–c. 83 CE), Roman general, governor of Britain, and son-in-law of the emperor Vespasian.

⁵ According to Livy (1.21.3), Numa claimed that the spring-goddess Egeria, who had a grove outside the Porta Capena where the Vestal Virgins came to draw water, advised him on religious matters.

⁶ During times of crisis or unrest and following inexplicable portents and prodigies, the senate could order the *quindecimviri* to consult the Sibylline books containing the utterances of Sibyl of Cumae, brought to Rome by Tarquin Superbus, fifth king of Rome. The books contained information about rituals and sacrifices to be performed to placate the gods and avert calamities.

Soothsayers could make no pronouncements on public affairs without permission of the magistrates. Their art was absolutely subordinated to the will of the senate as had been ordered by the books of the pontiffs,⁷ some fragments of which Cicero has preserved for us.⁸ “Let them be the arbiters of war; let wonders and extraordinary events be deferred, if the senate so orders by the Etruscan haruspices.”⁹ And in another place: “There are two kinds of priests: one to preside over ceremonies and sacrifices, the other to interpret the mysterious words of those who tell destinies and of soothsayers, when the senate and the people call for them.”¹⁰

Polybius included superstition among the advantages the Roman people had over other peoples:¹¹ what appears ridiculous to the wise is necessary for the fools; and this people, which is so easily moved to anger, needs to be checked by an invisible power.

The augurs¹² and haruspices¹³ were the genuine grotesques of paganism, but they will not be thought ridiculous if one reflects that in a wholly popular religion like that one, there was nothing extravagant. The credulity of the people made amends for everything among the Romans; the more contrary a thing was to human reason, the more it seemed to them divine. A simple truth would not have affected them deeply: they had to have causes for wonderment; they needed signs from the deity, and they found them only in the supernatural or the ridiculous.

In truth, it was a very extravagant thing to make the welfare of the republic depend on the sacred appetite of a chicken¹⁴ and on the disposition of the

⁷ I.e., the *Commentarii pontificum*, containing the so-called “Laws of Numa,” manuals to guide the pontiffs (*pontifices*), who were the ultimate authority on all religious questions, in the proper performance of religious observances.

⁸ Book II, *De Legibus*. (M) (II, 20–21.)

⁹ In Latin in Montesquieu’s text: *Bella disceptanto: prodigia, portenta ad Etruscos et aruspices si senatus jusserit deferunt.*

¹⁰ In Latin: *Sacerdotum genera duo sunt: unum quod praesit ceremoniis et sacriis, alterum quod interpretetur fatidicorum et vatum fata incognita cum senatus populusque ads[c]iverit.*

¹¹ See Polybius, *Histories*, 6, ch. 56, 6–12.

¹² Augurs interpreted the will of the gods from the flight of birds, and their art was called *augurium*, or *auspiciun*. Roman magistrates would scan the skies prior to meetings of the Roman assembly, and the augurs interpreted what they had seen. Being an augur was considered one of the highest dignities in the state, and Cicero was proud of being one, though by his time educated Romans no longer believed in the science of divination.

¹³ The haruspices were Etruscan soothsayers who divined the will of the gods by inspecting the entrails of animals sacrificed to honor the gods, or by interpreting natural phenomena such as lightning or earthquakes.

¹⁴ The “sacred chickens” were kept by the Roman augurs. If they eagerly consumed grain when it was offered to them, this was regarded as a good omen for conducting senate business, or for commencing a military expedition.

victims' entrails.¹⁵ But those who introduced these ceremonies were well aware of their strength and weakness, and it was only for good reasons that they sinned against reason itself.

If this rite had been more reasonable, clever people would have been fooled by it as well as the commoners, and in that way all the advantage which could be expected from it would have been lost. Ceremonies were therefore required which could sustain the superstition of some and enter into the politics of others; that is what divinations provided. There the decrees of heaven were placed in the mouths of the leading senators, enlightened men who knew equally well the foolishness and the utility of the divinations.

Cicero¹⁶ says that Fabius¹⁷ when he was an augur held as a rule that what was advantageous to the republic was always done under good auspices: "What is done under the best auspices is what is done for the welfare of the republic; what is done against the republic is done against the auspices."¹⁸ The same author¹⁹ says he agrees with Marcellus²⁰ that although the credulity of the common folk had originally established the auguries, the practice had been retained for the benefit of the republic; and he makes this distinction between Romans and foreign nations, that the latter invoked it indiscriminately on all occasions, and the former only in matters which involved the public interest. Cicero²¹ informs us that a thunderbolt striking on the left was a good omen, except in assemblies of the people, *praeterquam ad comitia*; the rules of the art ceased on that occasion; the magistrates judged the favorability of the auspices as they saw fit, and these auspices were a bridle with which they led the people. Cicero adds: "It was settled for the good of the republic that the leading citizens be the judges either for the holding of assemblies, or for voting on laws, or for judgments of the people or the

¹⁵ All the sacrificial victims referred to by Montesquieu in this essay are animals. The Romans considered the sacrifice of humans emblematic of foreign, barbarian customs, though there were occasional human sacrifices in Rome. In the fourth century CE, the emperor Theodosius banned the sacrifice of animals, labeling the practice *supersticio*.

¹⁶ *On Old Age.* (M) (iv, 11.)

¹⁷ Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus (280–203 BCE), Roman statesman, general, dictator, and augur.

¹⁸ In Latin: *optimis auspiciis geri quae pro salute reipublicae gererentur; quae contra repulicam gererentur contra auspicia fieri.*

¹⁹ *On Divination.* (M) (ii, 35–36.)

²⁰ Marcus Claudius Marcellus (268–208 BCE), the Roman general renowned for numerous military feats in both the Gallic War of 225 BCE and the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE).

²¹ *On Divination.* (M) (ii, 35.)

election of magistrates.”²² He had previously stated that one read in the holy books “when Jupiter thunders and casts bolts of lightning, it is forbidden to hold assemblies of the people.”²³ That had been introduced, he said, to provide the magistrates with a pretext for breaking off assemblies of the people: “That had been instituted in the public interest; indeed the intent was to have a reason for not convening the assemblies.”²⁴

Moreover, it was immaterial whether the victim that was sacrificed was found to be a good or a bad omen, for when they were not happy with the first, they sacrificed a second, a third, a fourth which were called *hostiae succedaneae*. Aemilius Paullus,²⁵ wishing to sacrifice, was obliged to slay twenty victims; the gods were appeased only with the last one in which were found signs that promised victory. That is why it was customary to say that in sacrifices the last victims were always more valuable than the first.

Caesar was not as patient as Aemilius Paullus. “After sacrificing several victims without obtaining good omens, he went into the curia, scorning all religion.”²⁶

As the magistrates found themselves the masters of omens, they had a sure way of turning the people away from a war that would have been disastrous, or of making them undertake one that might have been useful. The soothsayers who always followed the armies, and who were rather the interpreters of the generals than of the gods, inspired confidence in the soldiers. If by chance some ill omen had terrified the army, a shrewd general converted its meaning and made it favorable to himself. In such a way Scipio,²⁷ who fell while jumping from his vessel onto the African shore, took some earth in his hands: “I hold you,” he said, “O land of Africa!” and with these words rendered favorable an omen which had seemed so dire.²⁸ The Sicilians,

22 In Latin: *hoc institutum reipublicae causa est, ut comitiorum, vel in jure legume, vel in judiciis populi, vel in creandis magistratibus principes civitatis essent interpres* (Cicero, *On Divination*, II, 35).

23 In Latin: *Jove tonante et fulgurante comitia populi habere nefas esse* (Cicero, *On Divination*, II, 18).

24 In Latin: *hoc reipublicae causa constitutum, comitiorum enim non habendorum, causas esse voluerunt.*

25 Lucius Aemilius Paullus (229–160 BCE), twice consul of Rome (182, 168 BC) and victor in 168 over king Perseus at the Battle of Pydna ending the Third Macedonian War (171–168 BCE).

26 In Latin: *pluribus hostii caesis, cum litare non posset introit curiam spreta religione*. See Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* (“Lives of the Caesars”), Caesar, LXXXI).

27 Publius Cornelius Scipio (236–183 BCE), the Roman general whose victory over Hannibal at the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE ended the Second Punic War and earned him the cognomen Africanus.

28 Actually it was Caesar, not Scipio, who said this: see Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* (“Lives of the Caesars”), Caesar, LIX).

having embarked on some expedition to Africa, were so terrified by a solar eclipse that they were ready to abandon their mission; but the general explained to them that in truth this eclipse would have been a bad sign if it had appeared before their embarkation, but that, since it had appeared only afterwards, it could threaten only the Africans: in that way he put an end to their fright and found in a cause for fear a means of bolstering their courage.

Caesar was warned several times by the soothsayers not to go to Africa before winter; he did not listen to them, and thus got the jump on his enemies who, without this advance, would have had time to unite their forces.²⁹

When Crassus³⁰ during a sacrifice allowed his knife to slip from his hands, it was taken as a bad omen, but he reassured the people by saying: “Bon courage: at least my sword has never fallen from my hands.”³¹ When Lucullus³² was ready to do battle with Tigranes,³³ they came to tell him it was an inauspicious day: “Then let us [...] strive with might and main,” he said, “to make this, instead of an ill-omened and gloomy day, a glad and welcome day to the Romans.”³⁴ Tarquin the Proud,³⁵ meaning to establish games in honor of the goddess Mania,³⁶ consulted the oracle of Apollo, which answered obscurely and said they had to sacrifice heads for heads: *capitibus pro capitibus supplicandum*. The prince, even more cruel than superstitious, had some children sacrificed. But Junius Brutus³⁷ changed this horrible sacrifice, for he had it carried out with garlic and poppy heads, and thereby fulfilled or evaded the oracle.³⁸

They cut the Gordian knot when they could not untie it. Thus Clodius Pulcher, wanting to begin a naval battle, had the sacred chickens thrown into the sea, to make them drink, he said, since they refused to eat.³⁹

²⁹ See Caesar, *Bellum Africum* 3.1, a work which is not actually by Caesar but by one of his officers. See also Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* (“Lives of the Caesars”), Caesar, LIX.

³⁰ Marcus Licinius Crassus (115–53 BCE), an extremely wealthy supporter of Sulla in the Civil War between Sulla and Marius (83–82 BCE). He was praetor in 73 BCE, consul in 70 BCE, and censor in 65 BCE prior to forming the First Triumvirate with Caesar and Pompey in 60 BCE; he was killed in battle in 54 BCE during an invasion of Parthia.

³¹ See Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, xix.

³² Lucius Licinius Lucullus (118–57/56 BCE), skilled general and victor in the third Mithridatic War (73–63 BCE).

³³ Tigranes II, king of Armenia from 95 to 55 BCE.

³⁴ Plutarch, *Sayings of the Romans* (*Moralia*), trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931, III, 205) and *Life of Lucullus*, I.

³⁵ Tarquin Superbus (d. 495 BCE), who according to legend was the last king of Rome.

³⁶ Mania was the goddess of the dead who ruled the underworld along with Mantus.

³⁷ Lucius Junius Brutus, the legendary founder of the Roman republic (509 BCE) who overthrew Rome’s last king after the rape of Lucretia by Tarquin’s son Sextus Tarquinius.

³⁸ Macrobius, Book I. (M) *Saturnalia* vii.

³⁹ Valerius Maximus, Book I. (M) (*Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, I, 4.) Publius Claudius Pulcher (died c. 249–247 BCE), consul and commander of the Roman fleet in

It is true that they sometimes punished a general for failure to follow the omens, and even that was a new effect of the Roman policy: they wanted the people to see that defeats, cities captured, and battles lost were not the result of a bad constitution of the state or of the weakness of the republic, but of the impiety of a citizen who had angered the gods. With this conviction, it was not difficult to restore their confidence to the people: all it took for that was a few ceremonies and sacrifices.

Thus, when the city was threatened or afflicted by some misfortune, they did not fail to look for the cause, which was always the anger of some god they had neglected to worship; it was enough, to avoid that happening, to make sacrifices and processions and to purify the city with torches, sulfur, and salt water. The victim was led around the ramparts before being slaughtered, which was called “*sacrificium amburbium, et amburbiale*.⁴⁰ They even went so far sometimes as to purify the armies and the fleets, after which everyone again renewed his courage.

Scævola,⁴¹ a high priest, and Varro,⁴² one of their great theologians, said that the people had to be kept in the dark about many true things, and believe many false ones. St. Augustine⁴³ says that Varro had thereby revealed the entire secret of politicians and ministers of state. “He made known the true means of the wise by which kingdoms and people would be governed.”⁴⁴

The same Scævola, according to St. Augustine,⁴⁵ divided the gods into three classes: those who had been established by the poets, those who had been established by the philosophers, and those who had been established by the magistrates, *a principibus civitatis*.

Those who read Roman history and are a bit discerning find at every turn aspects of this policy we have just pointed out. Thus we see Cicero, who in private and among his friends repeatedly confesses his unbelief: “Do you think me mad enough to believe these things?”⁴⁶ And we see the same Cicero speaking in public with extraordinary zeal against the impiety of

⁴⁰ 249 BCE during the First Punic War, was fined for incompetence and impiety after ignoring the omen of the sacred chickens refusing to eat.

⁴¹ “Sacrifice led around the city.”

⁴² Publius Mucius Scævola (died c. 115 BCE) was tribune of the plebs in 141, praetor in 136, consul in 133 and *pontifex maximus* from 130 to 115.

⁴³ Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), author of *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* (“Of antiquities human and divine”), dividing Roman religion into mythical, natural, and civil theology.

⁴⁴ *De civitate Dei* [“On the city of God”], I.4 c. 31. (M)

⁴⁵ In Latin: *Totum consilium prodidit sapientum per quod civitates et populi regerentur.*

⁴⁶ *The City of God*, Book iv, chapter xxxi [IV, 27].

⁴⁶ In Latin: *ad eone me delirare censes ista ut credam* (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, I, vi, 10).

Verres.⁴⁷ We see a Clodius,⁴⁸ who had insolently profaned the mysteries of the good goddess, and whose impiety had been marked by twenty decrees of the senate, himself delivering an oration full of zeal, to that senate which had denounced him, against the disrespect of ancient practices and religion. We see a Sallust,⁴⁹ the most corrupt of all the citizens, placing at the head of his works a preface worthy of the gravity and austerity of Cato. I would never finish, if I wanted to exhaust all the examples.

Although the magistrates did not subscribe to the religion of the people, one must not imagine that they had none at all. Mr. Cudworth⁵⁰ has very ably proven that those among the pagans who were enlightened adored a supreme deity of whom the gods of the multitude were only an element. Pagans, who were not scrupulous about rites, believed that it did not matter whether one worshiped the divinity itself or the divinity's manifestations: to worship, for example, in Venus the passive power of nature, or the supreme divinity insofar as it can subsume all generation, or to worship the sun or the supreme being insofar as it gives life to plants and makes the earth fertile with its warmth. Thus the Stoic Balbus⁵¹ says in Cicero that God participates by his nature in all things here below; that he is Ceres on earth, Neptune on the seas: "They could discern a god who participates in the essence of each thing, Ceres on earth, Neptune on the sea, other divinities in other places. We must venerate and worship these gods, whatever their nature may be and by whatever name we are accustomed to calling them."⁵² We would know more about this if we had the book that Asclepiades⁵³ composed, entitled *The Harmony of All Theologies*.

⁴⁷ Gaius Verres (115–43 BCE), proconsul of Sicily forced into exile in 69 BCE following Cicero's successful prosecution of him for corruption.

⁴⁸ In 62 BCE Publius Clodius Pulcher (93–52 BCE) profaned the rites of *bona dea* ("the good goddess"), reserved for women, by disguising himself as a woman to gain entry to Caesar's house where he hoped to seduce Caesar's second wife, Pompeia. Cicero, facing a bribed jury, unsuccessfully prosecuted Clodius for his violation of religious protocol, and they became bitter enemies as a result. See also note 98 on p. 75.

⁴⁹ Gaius Sallustius Crispus (86–35 BCE), author of *The Conspiracy of Cataline*, *The Jugurthine War*, and the *Histories*.

⁵⁰ Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), author of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678).

⁵¹ Quintus Lucilius Balbus was a Stoic philosopher from Cadiz and a pupil of Panaetius; in *On the Nature of the Gods* (2,71) Cicero makes Balbus the spokesman of Stoic views.

⁵² In Latin: *deus pertinens per naturum cuiusque rei, per terras Ceres, per mare Neptunus alia per alia poterunt intelligi qui qualescunque sint quoque eos nomine consuetudo mēcupaverit, hos deos et venerari et colere debemus.* (Montesquieu slightly misquotes Cicero's text, which is *De natura deorum*, 11, 28.)

⁵³ Asclepiades of Phlius (c. 350–c. 270 BCE), Greek philosopher in the Eretrian school of philosophy.

As the dogma of the world-soul was almost universally accepted, and as each part of the universe was considered a living member in which this soul was diffused, it seemed permissible to worship all those parts indiscriminately and that the ritual should be arbitrary, as was the dogma.

Such was the source of that spirit of tolerance and kindness that prevailed in the pagan world. There was no thought of persecuting and mangling one another; all religions and all theologies were equally good; heresies, wars, and religious quarrels were unknown; provided everyone went to the temple to worship, every citizen was high priest in his family.

The Romans were even more tolerant than the Greeks, who always spoiled everything. Everyone knows the unhappy fate of Socrates.

It is true that the Egyptian religion was always proscribed in Rome, because it was intolerant, and wanted to reign alone, and to establish itself on the ruins of the others. So the spirit of kindness and peace that prevailed among the Romans was the real cause of the war they relentlessly waged against it.

Valerius Maximus⁵⁴ reports the action of Aemilius Paullus who, following a report of the senate ordering the destruction of the temples of the Egyptian deities, himself took an ax and struck the first blows so as to encourage by his example the workers stricken by a superstitious fear.

But the priests of Isis and Serapis had even more zeal for establishing these ceremonies than Rome had for prohibiting them. Although Augustus, according to Dio,⁵⁵ had forbidden their practice in Rome, Agrippa,⁵⁶ who governed the city in his absence, was obliged to forbid it a second time. One can see in Tacitus and in Suetonius⁵⁷ the frequent edicts that the senate was obliged to issue in order to banish this cult from Rome.

We must note that the Romans confused the Jews with the Egyptians, as we know they confused the Christians with the Jews:⁵⁸ these two religions were long regarded as two branches of the first, and shared with it the hatred, contempt, and persecution of the Romans. The same edicts that abolished the Egyptian ceremonies in Rome always included the Jewish ceremonies

54 Book I, ch. iii. (M): see p. 65, note 39.

55 Book 34. (M) (Book 54, 6.) Dio Cassius (c. 150–235 CE) was a Roman senator, consul, and proconsul of Africa, who wrote a history of Rome (in Greek) that is a key source for the last years of the republic and the early empire.

56 Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (64/62–12 BCE), son-in-law of Augustus, played a key role in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Augustus' victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra.

57 [Tacitus, *Annals*], I, 2. (M) Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Augustus, xxxi and xciii.

58 Cf. PL 83 and *Pensées* 167 and 232.

with them, as we see in Tacitus⁵⁹ and Suetonius in the lives of Tiberius and Claudius.⁶⁰ It is even more clear that historians have never distinguished the Christians' rite from the others. They had not even corrected this error in Hadrian's time, as we see from a letter which the emperor wrote from Egypt to the consul Servianus: "All who in Egypt worship Serapis⁶¹ are Christians, and even those who are called bishops, are attached to the cult of Serapis; there is no Jew, no prince of a synagogue, no Samaritan, no Christian priest, no mathematician, no soothsayer, and no baptizer who does not worship Serapis; even the patriarch of the Jews indiscriminately worships Serapis and Christ. These people have no god but Serapis: he is the god of the Christians, of the Jews, and of all peoples": *illi qui Serapium colunt, christiani sunt; et devoti sunt Serapi, qui se Christi episcopos dicunt. Nemo hic archisynagoga Judaeorum, nemo Samarites, nemo christianorum presbyter, non mathematicus, non aruspex, non aliptes, qui non Serapium colat; Ipse ille patriarcha judeorum scilicet, cum Aegyptum venerit, ab aliis Serapidam adorare, ab aliis cogitur Christum . . . viris illis deus est Serapia: hunc Judei, hunc christiani, hunc omnes et gentes.*⁶² Is it possible to have more confused notions of these three religions, and to conflate them more crudely?

Among the Egyptians, the priests formed a separate caste,⁶³ which was maintained at public expense. Whence arose several drawbacks. All the wealth of the state was being sunk into a society of men who, always receiving and never giving back, imperceptibly were taking everything. The priests of Egypt, thus paid wages for doing nothing, were all languishing in an idleness from which they emerged only with the vices it produces; they were disorderly, restless, and enterprising, and these qualities made them extremely dangerous. In short, a body whose interests had been violently separated from those of the state was a monster, and those who had established it had sown in the society seeds of discord and of civil wars. Such was not the case in Rome, where the priesthood had been made a civil function: the ranks of augur and of head pontiff were magistracies; those who were invested with them were members of the senate, and consequently did not have interests different from those of that body. "Far from using superstition to oppress the republic, they employ it usefully to sustain it. In our

59 Book II. (M) (Tacitus, *Annals*.)

60 Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Tiberius, XXVI and Claudius, XXII and XXV.

61 Serapis was a Graeco-Egyptian god whose worship was introduced by Ptolemy I Soter of Egypt (366–282 BCE).

62 Flavius Vopiscus, *Vita Saturnini*. (M) (See *Histoire Augustae scriptores*, 1620.)

63 Cf. *Romans*, chapter 22.

city,” says Cicero,⁶⁴ “the kings and the magistrates who have succeeded them have always had a double character, and have governed the state under the auspices of religion”: “In ancient times those who held power also possessed knowledge of augury, witness our city, where both the kings and augurs, and later private citizens invested with the same priesthood, governed the republic by the authority of religion.”⁶⁵

The *duumviri*⁶⁶ were in charge of sacred matters; the *quindecimviri* attended to the religious ceremonies and kept the books of the Sibyls which the *decemviri* and the *duumviri* had done formerly. They consulted the oracles when the senate had so ordained and reported back, adding their opinion. They were also assigned to execute all that was prescribed in the books of the Sibyls, and to arrange for the celebration of secular games. In this way all religious ceremonies passed through the hands of the magistrates.

The kings of Rome had a kind of priesthood; there were certain ceremonies which only they could perform. When the Tarquins⁶⁷ were expelled, it was feared the people would perceive some change in the religion, for which reason a magistrate was established called *rex sacrorum*, and whose wife was called *regina sacrorum*,⁶⁸ who in the sacrifices fulfilled the functions of the former kings. This was the only vestige of royalty that the Romans retained at home.

The Romans enjoyed the advantage of having as legislator the wisest prince of which secular history has ever spoken:⁶⁹ that great man sought throughout his reign only to make justice and equity flourish, and his neighbors benefited no less from moderation than did his subjects. He established the *fetiales*,⁷⁰ who were priests without whose ministry neither peace nor war could be decided. We still have formularies of oaths taken by

64 Book I, *On Divination*. (M) (I, 40.)

65 In Latin: *apud veteres qui rerum potiebantur iidem auguria tenebant, ut testis est nostra civitas, in qua et reges et augures, et postea privati eodem sacerdotio praediti rempublicam religionum autoritate vixerunt* (Cicero, *De divinatione*, I, 40; Cicero is slightly misquoted).

66 “Kings of sacred things” or *duumviri sacrorum*, allegedly created by Tarquin Superbus. The *duumviri* performed sacrifices and kept the Sibylline Books. They served life terms and were chosen from the nobility. Their numbers were increased to ten (*decemviri sacris faciundis*) and then to fifteen (*quindecimviri sacris faciundis*) by Sulla.

67 The Tarquins were the legendary first five kings of Rome, expelled, according to tradition, in 509 BCE.

68 “King of sacred things” and “queen of sacred things.”

69 Likely a reference to Numa Pompilius, although both Plutarch and Livy attributed the establishment of the *fetiales* to Tullus Hostilius (673–642 BCE), or to Ancus Martius (677–617 BCE), the legendary fourth king of Rome.

70 The *fetiales* were priests devoted to the worship of Jupiter. They served as ambassadors, advised the senate on foreign affairs, proclaimed war and peace, and confirmed treaties.

these *fetales* when peace was concluded with some people. In the one that Rome concluded with Alba, a *fetial* says in Livy: “if the Roman people is the first to violate it, *publico consilio dolove malo*,⁷¹ may he pray that Jupiter will strike them as he is about to strike the pig which he was holding in his hands”: and immediately he struck it dead with a stone.

Before starting a war, one of these *fetales* was sent to express grievances to the people which had caused some harm to the republic: he gave them a certain time to confer and seek means of re-establishing good relations; but if they neglected to come to a settlement, the *fetial* took leave and left the territory of that unjust people, after invoking against them the gods of both heaven and hell. Thereupon the senate decreed what it deemed just and pious; thus wars were never undertaken in haste, and they could only be the result of lengthy and mature deliberation.⁷²

The policy that held sway in the Romans’ religion developed even more in their victories. If superstition had been heeded, the gods of the conquerors would have been introduced among the vanquished; their temples would have been destroyed, and the establishment of a new rite would have imposed on them a servitude more severe than the first. They did something better. Rome herself submitted to the foreign divinities; she took them to her bosom, and through this bond, the strongest there is among men, she attached to herself peoples who regarded her more as a sanctuary of religion than as ruler of the world. But, so as not to make too many of them, the Romans, following the Greek example, skillfully conflated the foreign divinities with their own. If they found in their conquests a god similar to one of those who were worshipped in Rome, they adopted him, that is what it must be called, giving him the name of the Roman divinity, and bestowed upon him, if I dare use this expression, the right of citizenship in their city. Similarly, whenever they found some famous hero who had rid the earth of some monster, or subdued some barbarous people, they at once named him Hercules.

“We have advanced as far as the Ocean,” says Tacitus,⁷³ “and we found there the columns of Hercules, either because Hercules has been there, or because we have attributed to that hero all the deeds worthy of his glory”: *Ipsum quim etiam Oceanum illa tentavimus et superesse adhuc Herculis columnas fama vulgavit, sive adiit Hercules, sive quidquid ubique magnificum est in claritatem eius referre consuevimus.*

⁷¹ “Through public deliberation or fraudulently.” ⁷² See Plutarch, *Life of Numa*, XII, 7–8.
⁷³ Book V, ch. xxxiv. (M) (*On the Origins and Situation of the Germans*.)

Varro counted forty-four of these subduers of monsters. Cicero⁷⁴ counted only six, twenty-two Muses, five Suns, four Vulcans, five Mercuries, four Apollos, and three Jupiters.

Eusebius⁷⁵ goes much further, counting almost as many Jupiters as peoples.

The Romans, who actually had no divinity other than the genius of the republic, paid no attention to the disorder and confusion into which they threw mythology. The credulity of peoples, which always surpasses foolishness and extravagance, made up for everything.

Discourse on Cicero

(c. 1717)

Discours sur Cicéron, text by Pierre Rétat (*OC* VIII, 125–135). Montesquieu added this note at an indeterminate date: “I wrote this essay in my youth. It could be made good, if made into less of a panegyric. It also needs more detail on Cicero’s works, especially his letters, and more development on the causes of the downfall of the republic and the character of Caesar, Pompey, and Antony.” The text was first published in *Mélanges inédits* (1892), after which the manuscript disappeared. It resurfaced and was acquired in 1957 by the municipal library of Bordeaux (MS 2099; another partial copy with some variants is catalogued as MS 2538).

* * *

It is Cicero who of all the ancients had the most personal merit, and whom I would most like to resemble; there was none who sustained finer or greater roles, or loved glory more, or established his own more firmly, or who achieved it by less frequented paths.

Reading his works elevates the heart no less than the mind: his eloquence is always great, always majestic, and always heroic: one must picture him triumphing over Catiline,⁷⁶ one must picture him rising up against Antony,⁷⁷

74 Book III, *On the Nature of the Gods*. (M) (III, 16, 21–23, 34.) Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340 CE), was a noted historian of Christianity and expositor of its doctrines.

75 *Praeparatio evangelica* [*Preparation for the Gospel*], Book III. (M)

76 Lucius Sergius Catiline (108–62 BCE), experienced Roman politician and senator, having run unsuccessfully against Cicero for consul in 64, laid plans to seize control of the Roman government. After Cicero discovered the plot and denounced the conspirators in October 63, they were put to death without trial by vote of the senate, though Catiline fled and was killed in battle along with most of his army in January 62.

77 Marc Antony (83–30 BCE), co-consul with Caesar in 44 and leader with Octavian and Lepidus of the Second Triumvirate (43–33), was killed at the Battle of Actium in 31, after Octavian, Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son, convinced the senate to declare war on Cleopatra and declare Antony a traitor.

and finally one must picture him mourning the pitiful remains of a dying liberty. Whether he is reporting his own actions or reporting those of the great men who have fought for the republic, he is exhilarated by his glory and theirs; the boldness of his expressions makes us feel the intensity of his sentiments. I can feel him sweeping me up in his enthusiasm and entralling me with his raptures. What portraits he draws of the likes of Brutus,⁷⁸ of Cassius,⁷⁹ and of Cato!⁸⁰ What ardor, what vivacity, what rapidity, what a torrent of eloquence. I know not whether I would rather be like the hero or the panegyrist.

If he sometimes draws attention too ostensibly to his own talents, he does no more than express to me what he had already made me feel; he anticipates the praise that is due him; I do not resent having it pointed out to me that it is not a mere orator who is speaking, but the liberator of his fatherland and the defender of liberty.

He merits the title of philosopher no less than that of Roman orator; it can even be said that he stood out more in the Lyceum than on the rostrum: he is original in his philosophical works, but he has had several rivals for his eloquence.

He is the first of the Romans to rescue philosophy from the hands of the learned and free it from the impediments of a foreign tongue. He made it common to all men, like reason, and in the plaudits he received for this, men of letters found themselves in agreement with the people.

I cannot admire enough the depth of his reasoning at a time when sages distinguished themselves only by the oddity of their garb.⁸¹ I could only wish that he had been born in a more enlightened century and had been able to utilize for the discovery of truths those auspicious talents, which served only to destroy errors. It must be admitted that he left a frightful void in philosophy; he destroyed everything that had been conceived until then, and everything had to be conceived all over again; the human race re-entered infancy, so to speak, and was set back to where it started from.⁸²

What a pleasure to see him in his book on the nature of the gods⁸³ examine all the sects, confound all the philosophers, and brand each prejudice with some stigma! Sometimes he combats against these monsters, sometimes he

⁷⁸ Marcus Junius Brutus (c. 85–42 BCE), co-conspirator in the assassination of Caesar in 44.

⁷⁹ Gaius Cassius Longinus (c. 87–42 BCE), co-conspirator in the assassination of Caesar.

⁸⁰ Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis (95–46 BCE), called Cato the Younger.

⁸¹ Cato, for example, is said to have worn little clothing in order to learn how to endure cold and rain.

⁸² In his presentations of Greek philosophy in dialogue form, Cicero pointed out the flaws in various philosophical schools, leaving few received opinions unscathed.

⁸³ *On the Nature of the Gods (De natura deorum)*, 45 BCE, in which Cicero critiques first Epicurean and then Stoic views on the gods.

makes light of philosophy; the champions he introduces destroy themselves; one is confounded by the next, who is beaten in his turn; all these systems fade away in the presence of the others, and there remains in the reader's mind only scorn for the philosophers and admiration for the critic.

With what satisfaction one sees him, in his book on divination⁸⁴ free the Romans' spirit from the ludicrous yoke of soothsayers⁸⁵ and the rules of that art which was the shame of pagan theology, which was established at the outset by the cunning⁸⁶ of magistrates among crude peoples and weakened by that same cunning when they became more enlightened.

Sometimes he discloses to us the charms of friendship and makes us feel all its delights;⁸⁷ sometimes he makes us see the advantages of an age that reason illuminates, and that saves us from the violence of passions.⁸⁸

Sometimes shaping our conduct⁸⁹ and showing us the scope of our duties, he teaches what is honorable and beneficial, what we owe to society, what we owe to ourselves, and what we should do as heads of families or as citizens.⁹⁰

His conduct was more austere than his spirit. In his government of Cilicia⁹¹ he behaved with the disinterest of the likes of Cincinnatus,⁹² of Camillus,⁹³ of Cato; but his virtue, which was by no means austere, did not prevent him from enjoying the civility of his times. Notable in his moral writings are an air of gaiety and a certain contentment of spirit unknown to lesser philosophers. He never enunciates precepts, but he makes us aware of them. He does not incite to virtue but attracts us to it: it is enough to read his works to be turned away forever from Seneca⁹⁴ and others like him, men sicker than those they

84 *On Divination* (*De divinatione*, 44 BCE), in which Cicero refutes Roman beliefs in divination.

85 Haruspices (*aruspices*) were Etruscans with no official role in Roman religion. See p. 62, note 13.

86 *Politique*. 87 *On Friendship* (*De amicitia*), 44 BCE.

88 *De senectute* ("On old age"), 44 BCE. 89 *Mœurs*.

90 *De officiis* ("On duties"), 44 BCE.

91 Cicero's record as governor of the province of Cilicia from May 51 to November 50 was unblemished. A previous governor, Gnaeus Cornelius Dolabella, had been convicted in 80 BCE of illegally plundering the province.

92 Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (c. 519–430 BCE), Roman statesman and military leader of the early republic who, according to legend, was appointed dictator in 458 or 457 following an invasion of Rome by the people of Æqui and promptly returned to his farm once victory had been won.

93 Marcus Furius Camillus (446–365 BCE), military hero and five times Roman dictator, who according to legend was the victor in the long and costly wars against the Etruscan peoples of Veii, Falerii, and Capena; he was later dubbed the second Romulus after defeating the invading Gauls in 390.

94 Lucius Annaeus Seneca (1 BCE–65 CE), tutor and advisor to Nero, and author of letters and essays on the healing powers of philosophy.

wish to cure, more desperate than those they console, and more tyrannized by their passions than those they wish to free from them.

Some individuals accustomed to measuring all heroes by Quintius Curtius⁹⁵ have formed a very false notion of Cicero: they have seen him as a weak and timid man and have reproached him for something which Antony, his greatest enemy, never did. He avoided danger because he recognized it, but he no longer recognized it when he was no longer able to avoid it. This great man always subordinated all his passions, his fear, and his courage to wisdom and reason. I even dare say that there are perhaps none among the Romans who gave greater examples of strength and courage.

Is it not true that to declaim the Second Philippic⁹⁶ before Antony was to court certain death, to make a courageous sacrifice of his life for the sake of his offended glory? Let us, then, admire the orator's courage and daring even more than his eloquence. Let us picture Antony the most powerful of men, Antony the master of the world, Antony who dared all and could do anything he dared, in a senate which was surrounded by his soldiers and where he was more king than consul; picture him, I say, covered with humiliation and ignominy, overwhelmed, crushed, forced to listen to the most humiliating words from the mouth of a man whose life he could have taken a thousand times.

It was moreover not only at the head of an army that he required steadiness and courage: the setbacks he had to suffer in times so difficult for men of good will made death ever present. All the enemies of the republic were his as well, the likes of Verres,⁹⁷ Clodius,⁹⁸ Catiline,⁹⁹ Caesar,¹⁰⁰ Antony;¹⁰¹ indeed all the villains of Rome declared war on him.

⁹⁵ Quintus Curtius Rufus (first century CE), whose *Histories of Alexander the Great (Historiae Alexandri Magni)* is only partially extant.

⁹⁶ Cicero delivered twelve orations in the senate against Marc Antony in 44–43 BCE, the second of which catalogued atrocities committed by Antony; they are called the Philippics because they were modeled on Demosthenes' speeches denouncing Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great.

⁹⁷ I.e., Gaius Verres (115–43 BCE), the proconsul prosecuted by Cicero in 70 BCE for his corrupt governance of Sicily.

⁹⁸ I.e., Publius Clodius Pulcher (93–52 BCE), the Roman senator prosecuted by Cicero for unlawfully gaining entry to the ceremony of the *bona dea* in December 62 BCE. A bribed jury acquitted him, and Clodius took revenge on Cicero by securing passage of a law punishing with exile consuls who executed Roman citizens without trial. Since Cicero, with senatorial support, had done just that to end the Catilinarian conspiracy in 63 BCE, he found it necessary to flee Rome; he was granted the right to return in 57 BCE.

⁹⁹ See p. 72, note 76.

¹⁰⁰ Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), conqueror of Gaul (58–50), co-leader with Pompey and Crassus of the First Triumvirate (59–53), victor in the civil war against Pompey (49–48 BCE), dictator for life (46–44), and victim of assassination in March 44 BCE.

¹⁰¹ See p. 72, note 77.

It is true that there were times when his strength of spirit seemed to abandon him. When he saw Rome torn apart by so many factions, he gave in to sorrow; he allowed himself to be disheartened, and his philosophy was less strong than his love of the republic.

In that famous war that settled the destiny of the universe¹⁰² he trembled for his fatherland. He saw Caesar approaching with an army which had won more battles than it had legions; but what was his sorrow when he saw that Pompey was abandoning Italy and leaving Rome exposed to the fury of the rebels? After such cowardliness, he said, I can no longer respect that man, who rather than choosing exile from his fatherland, as he did, should have perished on the walls of Rome and buried himself under her ruins.

Cicero, who had long been studying Caesar's projects, would have subjected this ambitious man to the fate of Catiline if his prudence had been heeded. "If my advice had been followed," the orator said to Antony, "the republic would be flourishing today, and you would be nothing. It was my opinion that Caesar should not have been allowed to remain governor of Gaul beyond the five-year term; it was also my opinion that during his absence he should not have been allowed to seek the consulate. If I had been fortunate enough to prevail in either case, we would never have fallen into the abyss we are in today. But when I saw," he continues, "that Pompey had handed the republic to Caesar, when I could see that he was beginning too late to perceive the evils that I had for so long foreseen, then I spoke constantly of an accommodation, and spared nothing to bring the factions together."¹⁰³

Since Pompey had abandoned Italy, Cicero, as he himself says, knew very well that he should flee but he did not know whom he should follow and remained there for a while. Caesar conferred with him and hoped to convince him with entreaties and threats to side with his party; but this republican rejected his propositions with as much contempt as pride. Once the party of liberty had been destroyed, he submitted to him along with everyone else; he made no futile resistance; he did not, like Cato, shamefully abandon the republic along with his life;¹⁰⁴ he waited for a more auspicious time and sought in philosophy consolations which others had found only in death.

¹⁰² I.e., the civil war that raged between the forces of Caesar and Marc Antony and Pompey and his son (Pompey the Younger), from 49 to 44 BCE.

¹⁰³ This text is modeled on Cicero's *Second Philippic*, x, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Cato the Younger (95–46 BCE), choosing not to live in a Rome ruled by Caesar, committed suicide after Caesar's victory in the Battle of Thapsus in North Africa.

He withdrew to Tusculum in search of the liberty which his fatherland had lost. Those fields were never so gloriously fertile: we owe to them those lovely works which will be admired by every school and through all the transformations of philosophy.¹⁰⁵

But when the conspirators had committed that great deed which still today astonishes tyrants, Cicero emerged as if from the tomb, and that sun which the star of Julius had eclipsed took on a new light. Brutus, all covered in blood and glory, showing the people the dagger and liberty, cried out: "Cicero." And, whether he was calling for his assistance, or wished to congratulate him for the liberty that he had just restored, or whether, finally, this new liberator of his fatherland was declaring himself his rival, he gave him in a single word the most magnificent praise a mortal has ever received.

Cicero immediately sided with Brutus; the dangers did not surprise him. Caesar lived on in the hearts of his soldiers; Antony, who inherited his ambition, held the consular authority in his hands: all this did not prevent him from speaking out, and by his authority and his example he determined whether a still uncertain world should regard Brutus as a parricide or as the liberator of his fatherland.

But the liberalities Caesar had shown the Romans in his testament¹⁰⁶ were new bonds for them. Antony harangued that greedy people, and, showing them Caesar's bloody robe, so greatly moved them that they went and set fire to the houses of the conspirators. Brutus and Cassius, forced to abandon their thankless fatherland, had only that means of escaping the affronts of a populace as angry as it was blind.

Antony, emboldened, usurped more authority in Rome than even Caesar had done: he seized the public purse, sold provinces and magistracies, and waged war on Roman colonies; in short, he broke every law. Proud of the effects of his eloquence, he no longer feared Cicero's. He declaimed against him even in the senate, but was quite taken aback to find still one Roman in Rome.

Soon after, Octavian made the infamous agreement by which Antony, for the price of his friendship, demanded Cicero's head: never was a war more fatal to the republic than this scandalous reconciliation where the only victims sacrificed were those who had so gloriously defended it.

¹⁰⁵ The years 45 and 44 BCE were enormously productive for Cicero. Having withdrawn from politics after Caesar's victory in the Civil War, and while mourning the death of his daughter Tullia in February 45, he wrote, in rapid succession, thirteen works, including most of those alluded to in this essay.

¹⁰⁶ In his will Caesar bequeathed his gardens bordering the Tiber to Rome and 300 sesterces to every Roman citizen.

This is how the detestable Popilius¹⁰⁷ is cleared by Seneca for Cicero's death: this odious crime was the crime of Antony who had commanded it, not of Popilius, who had obeyed; it had been Cicero's proscription to die, and Popilius' to take his life; it was no marvel that he had been compelled to kill him since Cicero, the first of all the Romans, had been forced to lose his head.¹⁰⁸

Dialogue between Sulla and Eucrates

(1724)

Dialogue de Sylla et d'Eucrate, text by Pierre Rétat (OC VIII, 315–322). This is a fictional dialogue between the Roman general and dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla (138–78 BCE) and an interlocutor he names Eucrates. Montesquieu explained the genesis of this work as follows: “Some scenes from Corneille gave me the idea for this dialogue. I was young, and you had to be very young to be incited to write by reading the great Corneille” (*Pensées* 1948). The essay was first published in February 1745 in the *Mercure de France* and was included three years later in the second edition of *Romans*. The manuscript was among those sent to England in 1818 (see “A General Note on the Texts”), and now belongs to the Académie de Bordeaux (828/III, no. 5).

* * *

A few days after Sulla had resigned the dictatorship, I learned that my reputation among philosophers made him wish to see me. He was at his villa in Tibur, where, for the first time in his life, he was enjoying a peaceful existence. I did not experience in seeing him the panic one usually feels in the presence of great men. And as soon as we were alone, I said to him: “Sulla, is it true that you put yourself voluntarily into a state of mediocrity, a cause of affliction for most men? That you have willingly renounced the influence which your glory and your virtues gave you over all men? Fortune seems embarrassed at no longer elevating you to positions of honor.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Popilius Laenas was a military tribune sent by Marc Antony in December 43 BCE to kill Cicero, whose name had been placed on a list of the proscribed. Cicero was murdered on 7 December, during his attempted escape to Macedonia.

¹⁰⁸ See Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* (“Controversies,” or “Declamations”), VII, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Sulla voluntarily relinquished the dictatorship in 79 BCE and “walked up and down the forum like a private man, exposing his person freely to all who wished to call him to account” (Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, xxiv).

"Eucrates," he replied, "if I am no longer on view to the whole world, this is not my fault but the fault of human affairs, which have limits. I believed I had fulfilled my destiny as soon as there were no longer any great deeds I needed to perform. I was not made to rule peacefully over a people of slaves. I like to win victories, to found or destroy states, to make alliances, to punish a usurper, but as for the petty details of government where modest talents have so many advantages, the slow execution of the laws, the discipline of an inactive militia, my soul cannot concern itself with these things."

"It is surprising," I said to him, "that you have brought such scruples to ambition. We have indeed seen great men who are unaffected by the vain celebrity and the pomp which surrounds those who govern; but there are very few of them who have been untouched by the pleasure of governing, and of molding to their whim the respect which is due only to the laws."

"Eucrates, as far as I am concerned," he replied, "I have never been so unhappy as when I found myself absolute master in Rome, as when, looking around me, I found neither rivals nor enemies.

"I thought that one day people would say that I had punished only slaves.¹¹⁰ Do you desire, I said to myself, there to be no one left in your fatherland who can be stirred by your glory? And since you are establishing tyranny, do you not see that, after you, there will be no prince so weak that flattery will not place him on the same level as you and confer on him your name, your titles and even your virtues?"

"My Lord, you are changing all my ideas by the manner in which I see you act. I thought you had ambition, but no love of glory; I saw clearly that you had a lofty soul, but I did not suspect that it was great; everything in your life seemed to me to reveal a man consumed by the desire to command and who, filled with the most fatal passions, was willing to assume with pleasure the shame, the remorse and even the baseness associated with tyranny. After all, you have sacrificed everything to your power; you had made yourself formidable to every Roman; you had showed no mercy in exercising the functions of the most terrifying magistracy there ever was. The senate quaked to find itself with such a pitiless defender.¹¹¹ Someone said to you: 'Sulla, how much Roman blood will you shed? Do you wish to rule over

¹¹⁰ I.e., by means of Sulla's proscriptions, posted lists of individuals marked for execution as punishment for their support for the anti-Sullan regime established by Gaius Marius and Lucius Cornelius Cinna while Sulla was away (87–82 BCE) commanding Roman legions engaged against Mithridates VI Eupator (132–63 BCE), king of Pontus.

¹¹¹ Sulla pushed through the popular assembly a repeal of the Hortensian Law of 287 BCE that had authorized the popular assembly, the *comitia tributa*, to pass legislation without prior senate approval.

nothing but walls?' At that point, you published those tables which determined the life or death of every citizen."¹¹²

"And it is all the blood that I have shed, which has enabled me to perform the greatest of all my actions. If I had governed Rome with leniency, how surprising would it have been that boredom, loathing or caprice had prompted me to abandon government! But I have given up the dictatorship at a time when there was not a man alive who did not believe the dictatorship was my only asylum. I stood before the Romans, a citizen among citizens, and I dared say to them: 'I am ready to account for all the blood I have spilled for the republic; I shall answer to all who come asking for their father, their son, or their brother. Every Roman fell silent before me.'"

"This noble act of which you speak strikes me as highly imprudent. It is true that you had in your favor the astonishment you had just produced among the Romans. But how did you dare speak to them of justifying your actions and taking as your judges persons who had so many reasons for taking vengeance on you?

"Had all your actions been judged merely severe when you were the master, they became frightful crimes as soon as you no longer were."

"Are you calling crimes," he said, "things that have saved the republic? Would you have wished that I should stand by idly while senators betrayed the senate to aid the people who, imagining that liberty must be as extreme as slavery can be, wished to abolish the magistracy itself?

"The people, constrained by the laws and by the gravity of the senate, have always striven to overthrow both. But any man who is ambitious enough to aid the people against the senate and the laws, was always also ambitious enough to become its master. That is why we have seen so many republics fail in Greece and in Italy.

"To prevent such a disaster, the senate has always been obliged to keep this unruly people occupied with war. It has been compelled, in spite of itself, to ravage the earth and to conquer so many nations whose obedience is a burden to us. Now that the universe has no more enemies with which to confront us, what would be the fate of the republic? And, without me, could the senate have prevented the people, caught in its blind frenzy for liberty,

¹¹² Plutarch says that Sulla, after his return to Rome in 82 BCE, "now busied himself with slaughter, and murders without number or limit filled the city. [...] At last one of the younger men, Caius Metellus, made bold to ask Sulla in the senate what end there was to be of these evils." Sulla declined to say who would be spared, but agreed to name those who would be punished. Bounties were paid to those who brought in the severed heads of the condemned (*Life of Sulla*, iv, xxx–xxxii).

from subjecting itself to Marius or to the first tyrant who offered some hope for independence?

“The gods, who have given to most men a kind of cowardly ambition, have attached to liberty almost as many misfortunes as to servitude. But whatever must be the price of this noble liberty, we must necessarily pay it to the gods.

“The sea swallows up ships, it submerges whole countries; and yet it is useful to mankind.

“Posterity will judge what Rome has not yet dared to examine; it will find, perhaps, that I did not shed enough blood, and that not all the followers of Marius were proscribed.”

“Sulla,” I replied, “I have to say that you astonish me. What! It was for the good of your country that you spilled so much blood, and you have felt devotion to her?”

“Eucrates,” he replied, “I never had that dominant love of country which we find so often exemplified in the early times of the republic, and I admire Coriolanus who carried the flame and sword to the walls of his ungrateful city, who made each citizen repent for the affront that each citizen had made to him,¹¹³ quite as much as the man who drove the Gauls from the Capitol.¹¹⁴ I have never prided myself on being either the slave or the worshiper of the society of my peers; and this much-vaunted love [of country] is too vulgar a passion to be compatible with the loftiness of my soul. I have conducted myself solely by my thoughts and especially by the contempt I have had for mankind. You can judge from the manner in which I have treated the world’s only great people how great is my contempt for all the others.

“I have believed that, being on this earth, I must be free. If I had been born among the barbarians, I would have sought to usurp the throne less in order to command than to avoid having to obey. Born in a republic, I have obtained the glory of conquerors simply by seeking the glory of free men.

“When I entered Rome with my soldiers,¹¹⁵ I was breathing neither fury nor revenge. I judged the astonished Romans without hatred, but also

¹¹³ According to legend, Gaius Marius was called “Coriolanus” after he defeated the Volscians in a pitched battle in the city of Corioli in 493 BCE. Later, threatened with prosecution, he fled Rome and led the Volscians in war against his native land; only the tearful pleas of his mother and his wife finally persuaded him to lay down his arms. See Livy 2.34–35 and 2.40–41.

¹¹⁴ Marcus Furius Camillus (446–365 BCE), five times dictator of Rome, roused the Romans to drive the Gauls out of Rome in 390 BCE. See Livy 5.47–55.

¹¹⁵ I.e., Sulla’s march on Rome in 82 BCE after signing a peace treaty with Mithridates, enabling him to return to Italy; he defeated supporters of the Roman consul Cinna at the Battle of the Colline Gate.

without pity. You were once free, I said, and you wanted to live as slaves. No. But die now, and you will have the advantage of dying as citizens of a free city.

"I believed that to take away the liberty of a city of which I was a citizen was the greatest of crimes. I have punished that crime, and I have not worried about whether I was to be the good or the evil genius of the republic. In the meantime, the government of our fathers has been re-established; the people have atoned for all the affronts they had inflicted on the nobles; fear has suspended jealousies, and Rome has never been so tranquil.

"Now you know what made me determined to commit all the bloody tragedies you have witnessed. If I had lived during those happy days of the republic when the citizens, tranquil in their houses, committed to the gods a free soul,¹¹⁶ you would have seen me spend my life in this retreat that I have obtained only with so much blood and sweat."

"My Lord," I said, "it is fortunate that Heaven has spared the human race many men like yourself. Born for mediocrity, we are overwhelmed by sublime spirits. For one man to be above humanity, all the others pay too dear a price.

"You have regarded the ambition of heroes as a common passion, and you have esteemed only rational ambition. The insatiable desire to dominate, which you have found in the hearts of a few citizens, made you resolve to be an extraordinary man; love of your liberty made you resolve to be formidable and cruel. Who would have said that a heroism of principle could be more deadly than a heroism of impetuosity? But if, to avoid being a slave, you had to usurp the dictatorship, how did you dare to give it up? The Roman people, you say, has seen you unarmed and made no attempt on your life. You have escaped that danger; perhaps a greater danger awaits you. Some day you may see a great criminal taking advantage of your moderation¹¹⁷ and consider you merely part of the crowd of subjugated people."

"I have a name," he said, "and it is sufficient to ensure my safety and that of the Roman people. This name halts any attempt; and there is no ambition that is not terrified by it. Sulla breathes, and his genius is more powerful than that of all the Romans. Sulla is surrounded by Chaeronea, Orchomenus, and Signia;¹¹⁸ Sulla has given to every Roman family a dreadful example and one close to home; every Roman will always have me before his eyes, and even in his dreams I shall appear to him covered in blood; he will see the deadly

¹¹⁶ I.e., they died free men, a paraphrase of the expression *rendre l'âme à Dieu*.

¹¹⁷ I.e., Sulla's voluntary relinquishment of the dictatorship.

¹¹⁸ These were the three major battles Sulla fought against the forces of Mithridates.

Tables, and see his name first among the proscribed. People mutter in secret about my laws, but they will not be effaced even by waves of Roman blood. Am I not in the very heart of Rome? In my villa you will still find the javelin that I used at Orchomenus and the shield I carried on the walls of Athens. Am I any less Sulla because I have no more lictors? I have on my side the senate, together with justice and the laws; the senate has on its side my genius, my luck¹¹⁹ and my glory.”

“I recognize,” I said, “that once you have made someone tremble, you almost always retain some of the advantage you have seized.”

“No doubt,” he said. “I have astounded men, and that is an accomplishment. Review the story of my life in your mind: you will realize that I have derived everything from that principle, and it has been the soul of all my actions. Remember my quarrels with Marius.¹²⁰ I was indignant to see a man with no name, proud of his lowly birth, undertaking to drag the first families of Rome down to the level of the populace; and in this situation I bore all the burden of a great soul. I was young, and I resolved to put myself in a position to force Marius to answer for his contempt. To that end, I attacked him with his own weapons, that is to say with victories against the enemies of the republic.

“When the caprice of fate obliged me to leave Rome, I continued to act in the same way; I set out to make war on Mithridates, believing that I would destroy Marius by vanquishing the enemy of Marius. While I was allowing this Roman to enjoy his power over the populace, I was multiplying his mortifications and forcing him to go to the Capitol every day to give thanks to the gods for victories with which I was driving him to despair. I was waging a war of reputation against him, a hundred times more unrelenting than the war my legions were waging against the barbarian king. Not a single word left my mouth that did not signal my audacity; and the least of my actions, always magnificent, were for Marius deadly presages. Mithridates eventually sued for peace. The conditions he was offering were reasonable, and if Rome had been tranquil, or if my fortune had not been uncertain, I would have accepted them.

¹¹⁹ Sulla attributed his military successes to good fortune rather than skill, and, once made dictator of Rome, he asked to be given the title of “Fortunate,” thus becoming Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix. See Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, xxiv.

¹²⁰ Gaius Marius (157–86 BCE) launched Sulla’s military career in 107 by appointing him quaestor during the war against the North African king Jugurtha of Numidia. It was Sulla, however, not Marius, who skillfully negotiated the surrender of Jugurtha by his father-in-law, Bochus I, and this launched a personal rivalry that continued up until the death of Marius in 86.

But the poor state of my affairs obliged me to make the conditions more onerous. I demanded that he should destroy his fleet and restore to the neighboring kings all the kingdoms he had taken from them.¹²¹ ‘I will leave you,’ I told him, ‘the kingdom of your fathers. You should thank me for allowing you to keep the hand with which you signed the order to put to death a hundred thousand Romans in one day.’¹²² Mithridates was stopped in his tracks, and Marius, back in Rome, trembled at the news.

“This same audacity which served me so well against Mithridates, against Marius, against his son, against Telesinus¹²³ and against the people, and which made my whole dictatorship tenable, also defended my life on the day I gave it up, and that day ensures my liberty forever.”

“My Lord,” I said, “Marius reasoned as you do when, covered with the blood of his enemies and that of the Romans, he displayed the audacity that you have punished. It is true that you have in your favor a few more victories and greater excesses. But, in assuming the dictatorship, you exemplified the crime you have punished. That is the example which will be followed, and not that of moderation, which will only be admired.

“When the gods allowed Sulla to make himself dictator of Rome with impunity, they proscribed liberty there forever. They would have to perform too many miracles now to tear the ambition to rule from the hearts of all the Roman captains. You have taught them that there is a much surer path to move toward tyranny and keep it without danger. You have divulged this fatal secret, and taken away the single factor that makes people into good citizens in an overly rich and overly large republic: futility of hoping to oppress it.”

His expression changed, and he remained silent for a moment. “I fear only one man,” he said with emotion, “in whom I see many Mariuses.”¹²⁴ Chance,

¹²¹ Sulla did not in fact drive a hard bargain with Mithridates, who only handed over seventy ships and five hundred archers and sailed away to Pontus (Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, xxiv). Mithridates, however, was required to relinquish all territory outside Pontus and return his Roman prisoners. The lenient terms enabled Mithridates to become Rome’s long-term nemesis until his final defeat by Pompey in 66 BCE.

¹²² Plutarch reports that Mithridates, prior to the Roman senate’s declaration of war on him, had massacred, on a single day, 150,000 Romans in Asia (*ibid.*).

¹²³ Pontius Telesinus, the Samnite leader allied with Cinna’s regime, defeated by Sulla at the Battle of the Colline Gate in 82 BCE.

¹²⁴ The reference is to Caesar, I. The “many Mariuses” comment, now thought to be apocryphal, is recorded in Plutarch’s *Life of Caesar* and also in Suetonius’ *De vita Caesorum* (“Lives of the Caesars”), Caesar, I.

Dialogue between Sulla and Eucrates

or perhaps a more powerful fate, has led me to spare him.¹²⁵ I watch him incessantly; I study his soul: in it he is hiding deep designs. But if he ever dares form the plan of commanding men whom I have made my equals, I swear by the gods that I will punish his insolence."

¹²⁵ Sulla did not proscribe Caesar, even though he was the son-in-law of Cinna and the nephew of Marius. He did tell Caesar, however, that he would have to divorce his wife as the price for his safety. Instead, Caesar left Rome and did not return until Sulla died in 78 BCE.